

Stylistic and Semantic Incongruities in the Earliest Purported English Translation of the Qur'an by Alexander Ross

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Abstract:

Recognizing the unequivocal importance of English as the only and uncontested medium of global communication for disseminating the universal message of the Qur'an, this paper analyzes the ways in which translational incompetence or substantial incongruities could distort the very essence of the actual text and meaning of this last and eternal message of Allah. Taking selected parts of the first two "ruku's" of surah al-baqara as a case study, it traces some salient instances of such deviation in the earliest purported English rendering of the Qur'an by Alexander Ross done in the middle of the seventeenth century. Besides attempting to make readers wary of such misleading attempts, it also aims at inculcating in them a sense of distinguishing the authentic works of genuinely qualified renderers from such ill-motivated and ill-informed purported translations.

The Qur'an is an eternal code of guidance for all human beings with no barriers of time and place, while English is the only medium of global communication in today's world. As such, both have a universal reference and appeal, and coordinating them should rightly be considered as a worth appreciation move of great value and impact. How *the Qur'an* is introduced to and understood by the English reading people is not going to influence only the inhabitants of English speaking countries or those having English as their only or first language, but rather a vast section of humanity at large. Hence it is imperative to make sure that those who want to learn the meaning and message of the Qur'an through the medium of English get its genuine and authentic form, and are not misled by ill-intended or ill-informed English versions like the one discussed in this paper.

No student of the *Qura'n* can miss the fact of its being a living miracle of unparalleled nature. Having taken the responsibility of getting it authentically compiled and disseminated¹ as well as protecting it from all types of alteration and amalgamation², Allah has miraculously safeguarded it as a single version in

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which all Muslims unanimously believe and agree. Similarly, its richness of vocabulary, its appropriateness of diction and the rhetorical effect of its phrases are unbelievable, keeping in view the educational backwardness of Arabia of that time and the limited nature of Arabs' interaction with the world at large except nations and tribes in their immediate neighbourhood. At the time of revelation of *the Qur'an*, the educational, cultural, political and economic conditions of Arabs, as well as their overall standard of living, were no match to the richness, capacity and potentials of their language. Looking at the tremendous progress, depth and expansion achieved by the Arabic spoken in Hijaz during the few decades before the birth of Muhammad (peace be upon him) and during his forty years before the beginning of Qur'anic revelation, one can easily see how a language was being divinely prepared—expanded as well as enriched—for accommodating the last, eternal and complete message of Allah.

As already briefly hinted at and as to be elaborated subsequently, Qur'anic text is far above being an Arabic text of even the highest caliber. As such no language of even the same cultural and linguistic orientation as Arabic can have the capacity to replicate the true spirit of its expressions. In the introductory remarks to his translation *The Message of the Qura'n*, Asad (1980) has aptly pointed out that *the Qura'n* is "unique and untranslatable."³ In a similar effort, Turner (1997) has further advanced this argument by adding to it a higher sense of responsibility and hence a more enhanced level of care and caution than needed for translating human works.

"The notion of untranslatability operates on two distinct levels—the aesthetico-linguistic and the religio-philosophical— but at the heart of both arguments lies the question of fidelity, of faithfulness to the text— and, by extension in the case of religious scripture, faithfulness to God himself."⁴

Notwithstanding these essential translatability issues, the nearest possible rendering of *the Qur'an* could be done in a language having the richest vocabulary, structural variations and alternatives maximum forms of impressionistic expressions. Notwithstanding certain terms affected by some unbridgeable cultural gaps, English has got these characteristics more than any other language and hence could be the best source for disseminating Qur'anic message to the humans of our age.

Unfortunately, however, the history of rendering the Qur'an into English does not begin on a positive note. Its earliest recorded purported English translation was done by Alexander Ross in 1649. It was not based on its original Arabic text, but rather on an ill-motivated and prejudiced French rendering by a French courtier Andrew du Ryer who tried to distort its image as divine revelation by giving it the highly objectionable title *L'Alcoran de Mahomet*, also retained by Ross as *The Alcoran of Mahomet*. Along with the elements of prejudice evident in distorting the spelling and pronunciation of both the word "*Qur'an*" (about which both Ryer and Ross could be excused due to having no alternative for

“*qaaf*” sound noted here by “Q”), and the proper name “Muhammad” which they could perfectly spell and pronounce without any difficulty, the motive which prompted the translation speaks volume about its nature and reliability. The publisher’s note introduced the work as “And newly Englished, for the satisfaction of all that desire to look into the *Turkish Vanities*.⁵

Having neither access to the Ryer’s French rendering nor even the basic knowledge of French language, I am not in a position to ascertain how much faithful Ross has been to Ryer’s version. Hence, we consider Ross’s rendering as an original effort and focus on the gaps, misconceptions, and semantic and structural incongruities found in Ross’s purported English rendering of the Qur’an, taking the first two *rukoo*s of *surah al-baqara* as a case study for that purpose. The objective is not to dig out an ancient or archived text and highlight its shortcomings: it is rather to make millions of human beings who wish to understand the last message of Allah through an English translation aware of the possibility of being misled by such ill-conceived, ill-informed and ill-conveyed versions like the one in focus. Ross’s purported translation is not only considered significant for being the first ever translation of the Qur’an in English—and the third in any European language, but has been successively reprinted, with its last reprint coming as late as 2017. Countering instances have been provided from reliable renderings into English by qualified scholars like Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall and Abdullah Yusuf Ali (though I personally feel and see room for a more improved rendering). These countering instances not only show the unreflective nature of Ross’s text, but also point out towards better available options.

Before coming to the subject in focus as projected above, it will help to have a word about translatability issues inherently associated with sublime works in general and the Qur’anic text in particular, so that Ross’s flaws are easily categorized as advertent or erroneous.

Undertaking to translate semantically rich texts from one language to another is inherently a tough and challenging task. Every language has its own idioms, phrases, terminologies and varieties of diction for various themes and subjects. Generally, words denoting concrete objects or universally applicable concepts could be conveniently represented in other languages by matching words having similar or relatable meanings. A substantial number of words and phrases, however, couldn’t find appropriate substitutes in other languages and are to be elucidated rather than translated. This is the case of ordinary texts that are complex in the sense of having deeper semantic implications than those suggested by obvious structural constructions. Sublime poetry and masterpieces of prose go even beyond that and consequently pose more serious challenges in translating maneuvers. The case of *the Qur’an*, however, is different from anything else. Being the only verbatim record of Divine revelation, it is unique in status and peculiar in structure. It is strikingly different not only from all other forms of expression ever attempted in Arabic language in general, but also

from the language spoken by the last Messenger of Allah himself and his formal statements recorded as *ahaadith*. This peculiarity of the Qur'anic text is not merely one of its auxiliary attributes: it is rather one of its core identities by virtue of which Allah has repeatedly challenged its falsifiers in the Qur'an itself to bring a single *surah* of the same sort.⁶ Hence, keeping in mind the inherent difficulties associated with the process of textual translation in general, one can easily infer the exceptional challenges to be faced while trying to translate such an exceptionally unparalleled and unmatched text as the glorious *Qur'an*. Contemplating on the untranslatability of Qur'anic text, Turner exclaims:

“When one considers the complexities involved in translating a work such as the Qur'an, one often wonders whether it might not be easier for the whole English-speaking world to learn Arabic in order to read the Qur'an than for one translator to bring the Qur'an to the whole of the English-speaking world.”⁷

Despite of the rhetorical relevance and worth of these remarks, Turner's suggestion is too idealistic to materialize and attempts to translate the Qur'an into English have never ceased or receded. As already pointed out, English has the best potential of replicating the Qur'anic text to the best possible extent. As such, an English translation is rightly expected to be one of the best in sense of conveying the meaning of the original as faithfully as possible. Furthermore, Ross attempted translating *the Qur'an* when English was being enormously enriched by the outcomes of the Renaissance. Shakespeare and Bacon had recently lived and died; Milton was at his climax while Dryden was at his budding stage. After witnessing the climax of English drama in the just preceding Elizabethan age, men of letters were attempting unparalleled experimentations with words and phrases—the most outstanding being metaphysical poetry. Metaphysical poetry was a novel form of structural maneuvering, testifying to the vastness and richness of English language at that time. Being its native speaker, Ross is expected to have at least a mediocre command of English, and the unjustifiable blunders in his purported rendering cannot be attributed to any inherent limitations of the English language itself.

Coming to our case study of *Surah Al-Baqara*—the second *surah* of the Qur'an preceded in order of compilation only by the inaugural *Al-Fatiha*—one can see Ross's first token of distortion in his introductory description of the *surah* as “written at Mecca”⁸ instead of “revealed at Makkah/Mecca”.

In the actual text of the *surah*, Ross's first challenge comes with understanding and interpreting the three *Huroof-e-muqatta'at* (ح ل ه) for which he coins an utterly unreflective statement “I am the most wise God”. These unusual alphabet-clusters to be pronounced separately are a unique feature of *the Qur'an* known only to the linguistic and literary elites of Arabic. They cannot be translated into any other language as the very concept doesn't exist elsewhere. As such they are to be elaborated—most appropriately once for all here at their first occurrence in compilation order. To me they seem to mean that Allah has

used the same alphabets of your language with its limitations; but see what a uniquely sublime text has been composed! Some translators have elaborated them while others have left them as they are. None of the authentic sources, however, has interpreted them in a way similar to Ross.

Then there are two instrumental incongruities in the second verse which has been translated by Ross as “There is no Error in this Book; it guideth into the right way those that are righteous” Yusuf Ali’s translation of the same verse is “This is the Book; in it is guidance sure, without doubt, to those who fear Allah”; Pickthall’s is “This is the Scripture whereof there is no doubt, a guidance unto those who ward off (evil)”; while Sahih International records it as “This is the Book about which there is no doubt, a guidance for those conscious of Allah “. Here one can easily find a pattern of consistency in these three renderings which is strikingly missing in Ross’s. The Arabic word ‘raib’ clearly means “doubt” for which “error” has never been a synonym in English. Even a layman can easily understand that having no error in something is totally different from having no doubt about something. The second point is Ross’s missing the phrase “this is the book/scripture” which connects this surah to the just preceding al-fateha as a reply to the supplication for guidance invoked therein. Similarly, the ineffectiveness of Ross’s “it guideth into the right way those that are righteous” is clearly evident in view of the other three sources.

Similarly, Ross demonstrates two substantive deviations in the third verse; the first is “who believe what they see not” for “*yu’minoona bil-ghaib*” and the second is “dispense in Alms” for “*yunfiqoon*”. His translation of the whole verse goes: “who believe what they see not, who make their Prayers with affection, and dispense in Alms a part of the Goods that we have given them.” A contrasting view of Yusuf Ali’s rendering makes the difference clear : “Who believe in the Unseen, are steadfast in prayer, and spend out of what We have provided for them”. Believing in the unseen is a positive attribute based on an adequate understanding of the inherent limitations of our empirical perception. It shuns absolute rationalism and empiricism in favour of willingness to have faith in revealed and intuitional facets of reality beyond the scope of our senses. It is markedly different in sense from “believing what they see not” carrying a number of negative connotations including following someone or something blindly, without any sense of what one is doing.

In the sixth verse, Ross has crossed all limits of coining and forgery by commencing with a sentence “Misery is upon unbelievers” which is nowhere there in the Qur’anic text and is rightly missing in all genuine translations. A closely following distortion is using the word “reprove”—another utterly negative word instead of the closely reflective word “warn” for “*inzaar*”. Here again, the comparison would make it crystal clear. Ross’s translation reads “Whether thou reprove them, or do not reprove them, they will not be converted”; while Yusuf Ali’s translation says “As to those who reject Faith, it is the same to them whether thou warn them or do not warn them; they will not

believe". It is also noteworthy here that Ross has used the inadequate notion of "conversion" instead of the popular and relevant concept of "belief".

Yet another discrepancy can be witnessed in translation of verse number 23 which Ross has rendered as "If you doubt that I have sent my servant, come, and bring some Chapters like to the Alcoran, and call to witness the Idols that you adore; if you are good men". Given below are three renderings of the same verse from different authentic sources that are in complete harmony among themselves and markedly different from Ross's text, vividly exposing therein the element of ignorance, or distortion, or both.

"And if ye are in doubt as to what We have revealed from time to time to Our servant, then produce a Sura like thereunto; and call your witnesses or helpers (If there are any) besides Allah, if your (doubts) are true" (Yusuf). 9

"And if ye are in doubt concerning that which We reveal unto Our slave (Muhammad), then produce a surah of the like thereof, and call your witness beside Allah if ye are truthful" (Pickthall). 10

"And if you are in doubt as to that which We have revealed to Our servant, then produce a chapter like it and call on your witnesses besides Allah if you are truthful." 11

This opening part (first two rukus) of suarh al-baqara have been chosen as a case study, not implying that here there are more gaps and discrepancies than elsewhere. The translator basically lacks the sincerity, objectivity, insight as well as linguistic competence needed for accomplishing such a huge task, and as such shouldn't have attempted it. But as that part of the episode is already over, it is imperative to scrutinize and censure such inadequate attempts in order to save the steadily growing and keenly anxious readers of the Qur'an through the medium of English from such defective and misleading interpretations of the Divine message and consequent misconceptions about Islam.

Notes and References :

¹. *Al Qiyamah* 75: 16 – 17.

². *Al-Hijr* 15: 9.

³. Asad, M. (1980). *The Message of the Qura'n*. Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, p.v.

⁴. Turner, C. (1997). *The Qur'an: A New Interpretation*. Richmond : Curzon, p.x.

⁵. Lock, Peter (2006). *The Routledge Companion to the Crusades*. London: Routledge, p.261.

⁶. *Al-Baqara* 2: 23.

⁷. Turner, C. (1997). *The Qur'an: A New Interpretation*. Richmond : Curzon, p.xiii.

⁸. Ross, Alexander (1649). *The Alcoran of Mahomet*, translated out of Arabick into French, by the Sieur Du Ryer: <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A47589.0001.001/1:11.2?rgn=div2>.

⁹. Yusuf, A. A. (1991). *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*. . Brentwood, Maryland, USA:

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- ¹⁰. Pickthall, M. (1971). *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an*: Text and Explanatory Translation.

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